

Perceptions of Australia as a postgraduate research destination

June 2010

INTRODUCTION

In 2009 the Group of Eight (Go8) commissioned market research to examine the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of Australia as a destination for study at the Higher Research Degree level.

This backgrounder highlights some of the positive aspects of the Australian experience.

The top five aggregated strengths of Australia as a research destination were: Australia's multicultural society, the friendly and welcoming nature of Australian society, the quality of Australia's universities, the safe environment and the research culture.

In addition there are very high levels of satisfaction with the quality of academic supervision amongst current and former research students and students are attracted to the shorter duration of the Australian PhD.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students in both Australia and other countries focused on the following themes:

1. Attitudes and perceptions towards various destinations
2. The final decision about country, university and topic
3. Main sources of information and influence
4. Primary expectations
5. Levels of satisfaction with the living and research experience

The Go8 commissioned Rob Lawrence of Prospect Research to undertake the study with funding from the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Safe, friendly and multicultural

Despite media attention to the contrary in the past 12 months, the overwhelming majority of research students surveyed both perceive and experience Australia to be a safe and secure country in which to live and study. The great majority also perceive and experience Australia to be a multicultural and friendly society.

2. Satisfaction with supervision

The vast majority of HDR students reported positively upon their overall experience. Over three quarters of current PhD students reported very high levels of satisfaction with the frequency of their meetings with supervisors. Eighty five per cent of graduates said they had developed a very good relationship with their supervisor.

3. Shorter PhD and flexible research culture

International students are attracted by the shorter duration of an Australian PhD compared with opportunities in North America, as well as the high quality reputation of Australian universities and the flexibility of research topics.

METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research

An extensive online study attracted responses from 1,841 students, alumni, and applicants. This represents a significant proportion the international research students in Australia, recorded as numbering 9,836 in 2007¹.

PhD students in Australia	Research Masters students in Australia	Prospective research students who have been offered a place at a university in Australia	Alumni who recently completed their PhD in Australia
1,170	148	308	215

The students represented 88 different countries including:

China	286
Malaysia	189
Western Europe (Germany 54, UK 23, France 21, Italy 18)	158
Indonesia	144
Iran	118
India	86
Vietnam	78
Bangladesh	71
USA	65
Singapore	60
Pakistan	58
Thailand	49
Sri Lanka	45
Canada	43
Brazil	32

They were researching in a wide variety of disciplines including:

Engineering	313
Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences	144
Computer Sciences	104
Agriculture	92
Biology	90
Education	78
Social Sciences	71
Health Sciences	70
Chemistry	62
Economics	61
Environment	61
Medicine	52

Qualitative research

- 28 focus groups were conducted at 17 universities in Australia (including participants from 62 different countries).
- Eight focus groups were conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand.

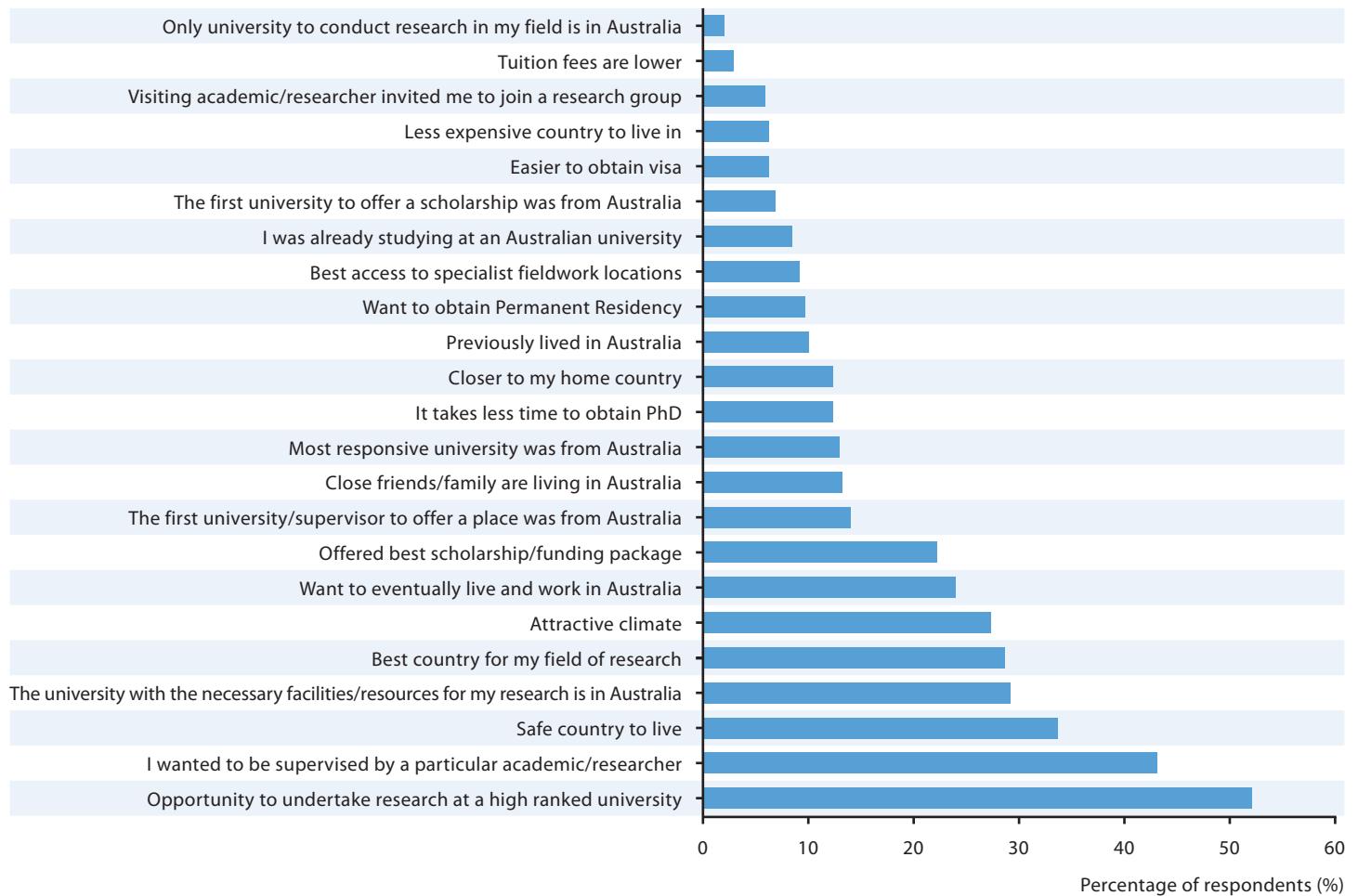
1. SAFE, FRIENDLY AND MULTICULTURAL

From a list of 23 options, overall current applicants listed safety as one of the top three reasons why they considered Australia.

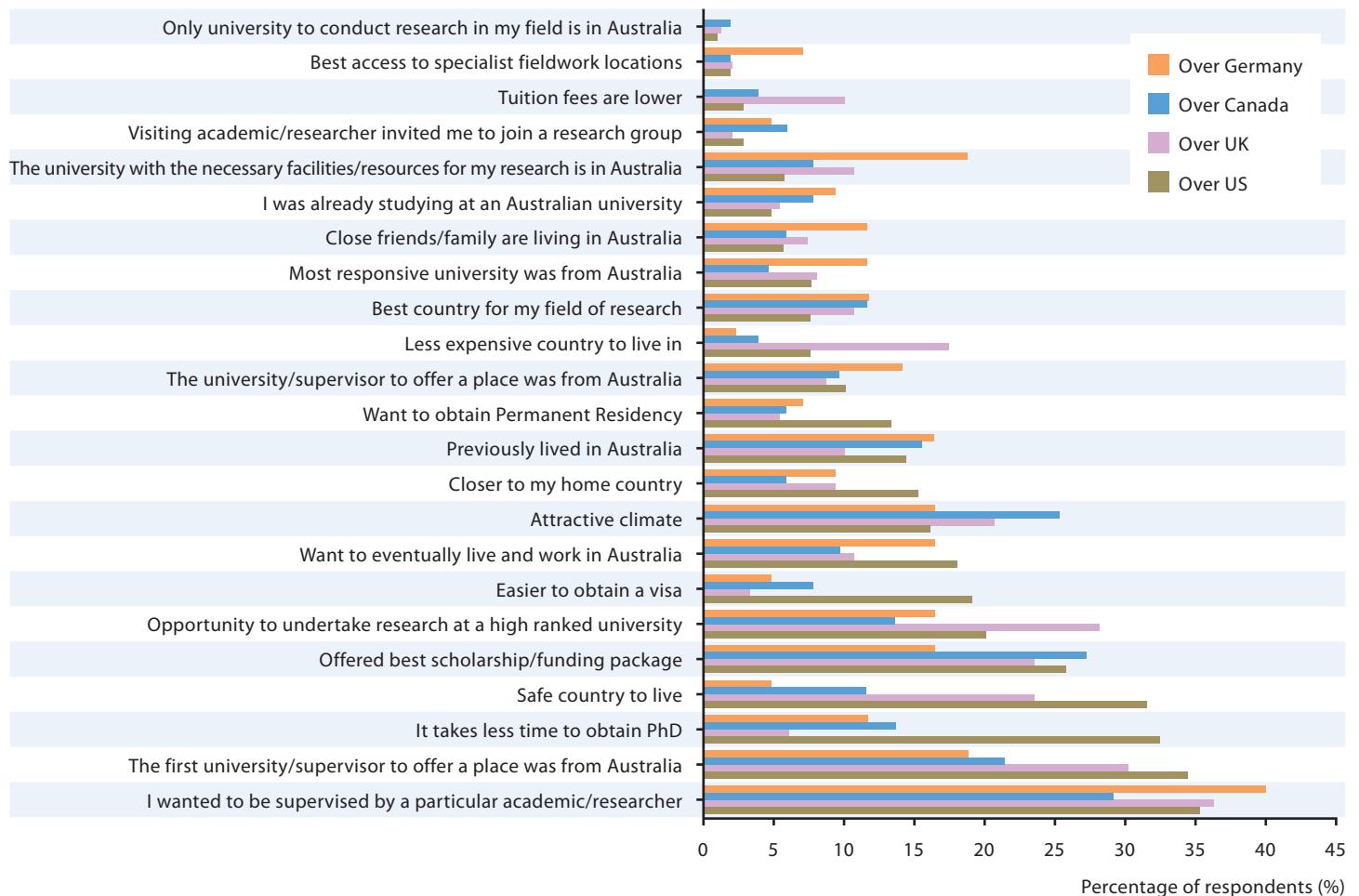
Safety was also among the top four reasons that current students had chosen Australia as their destination.

¹. Olsen, Alan. *The International PhD Market*. Research conducted for the Group of Eight, 2008.

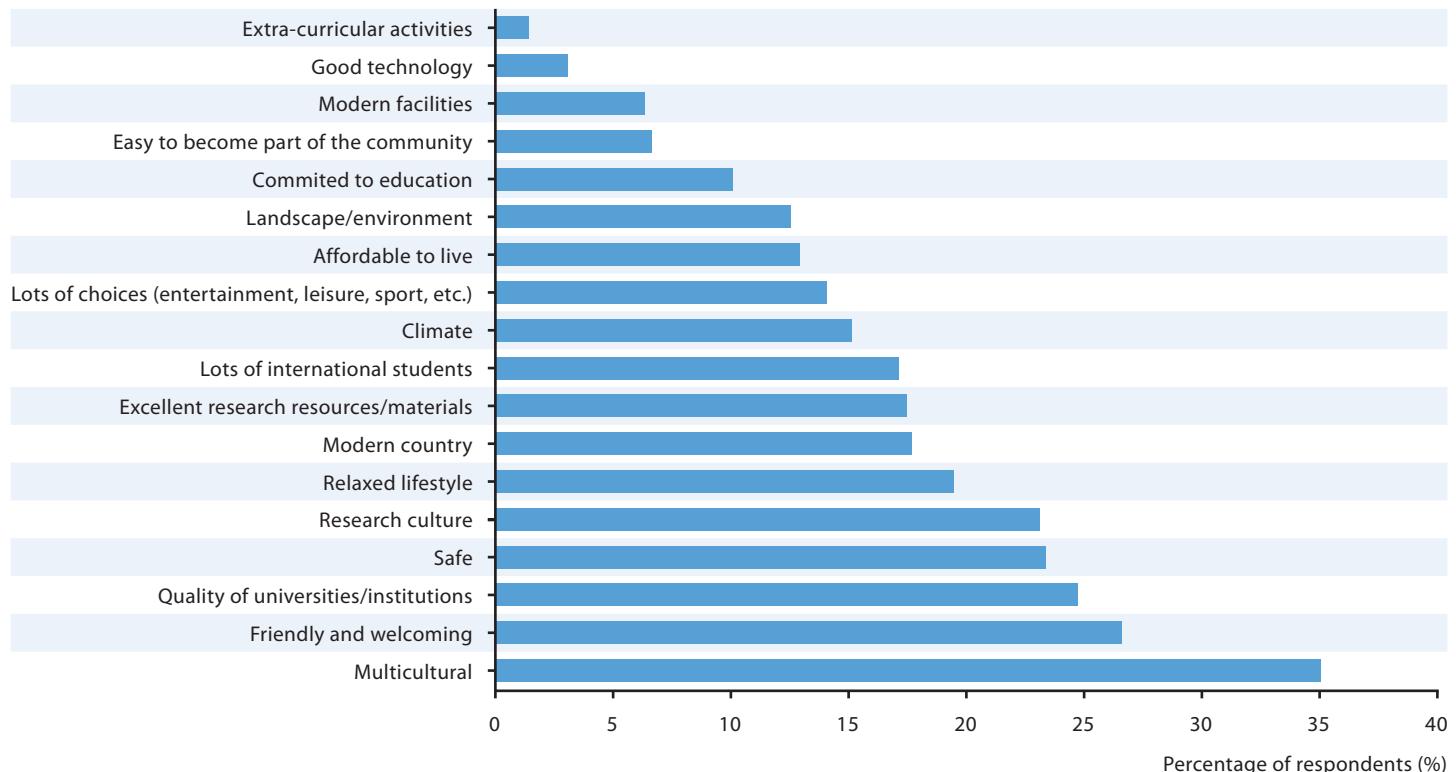
Aggregate of the three most important reasons why PhD applicants who have been offered a place chose Australia



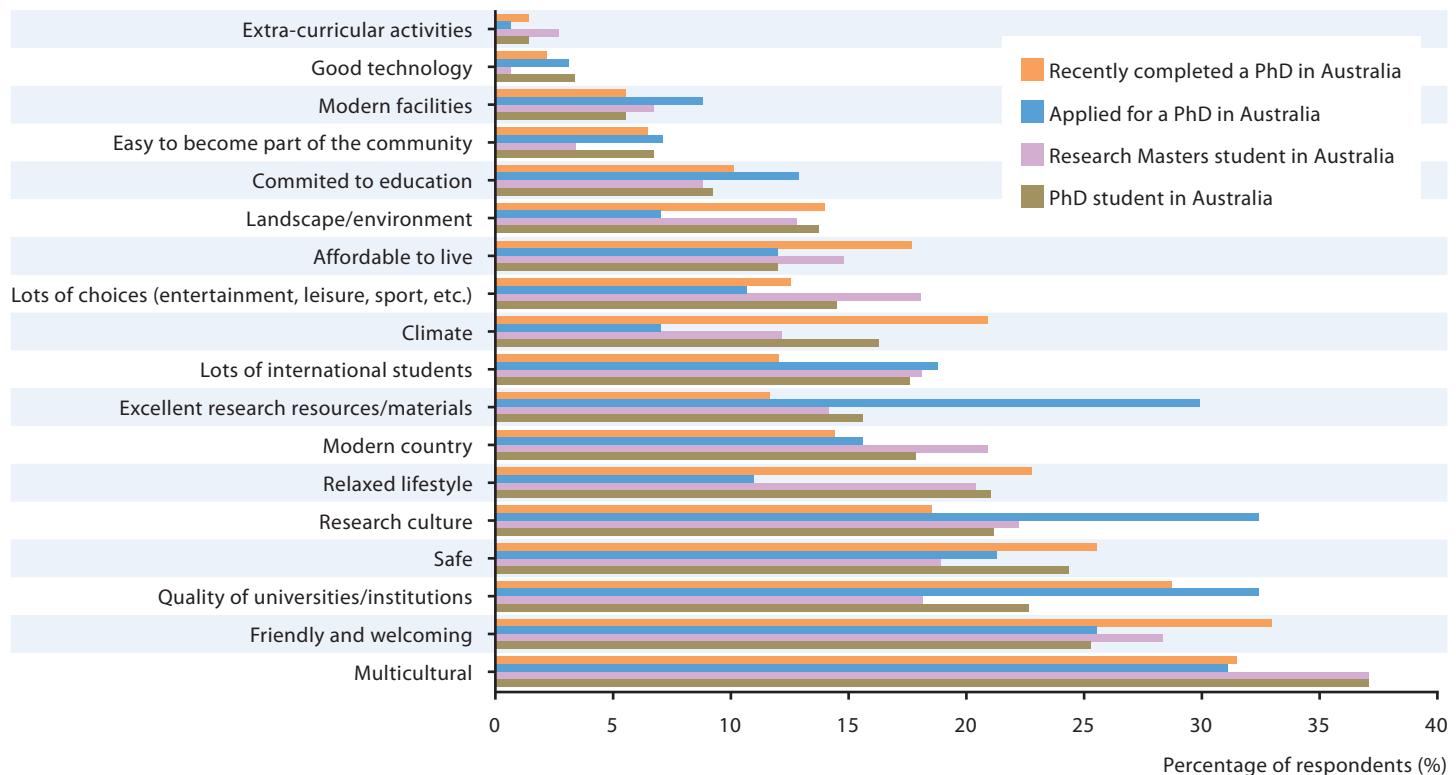
Why PhD students in Australia who were offered a place on a PhD at a university in another country elected Australia over this other country



Aggregate of the three greatest strengths of Australia as a country in which to undertake a Higher Research Degree



Aggregate of the three greatest strengths of Australia as a country in which to undertake a Higher Research Degree



A mere 3% of the graduates surveyed and 8% of current students perceived 'safety' as one of the weaknesses of Australia as a research destination.

Respondents were asked to indicate which countries are most associated with various statements. The top two responses per statement were as follows:

- Most generous scholarship system: United States (35.5%), Australia (29%)
- Most flexible research environment: United States (48.4%), Australia (25.8%)

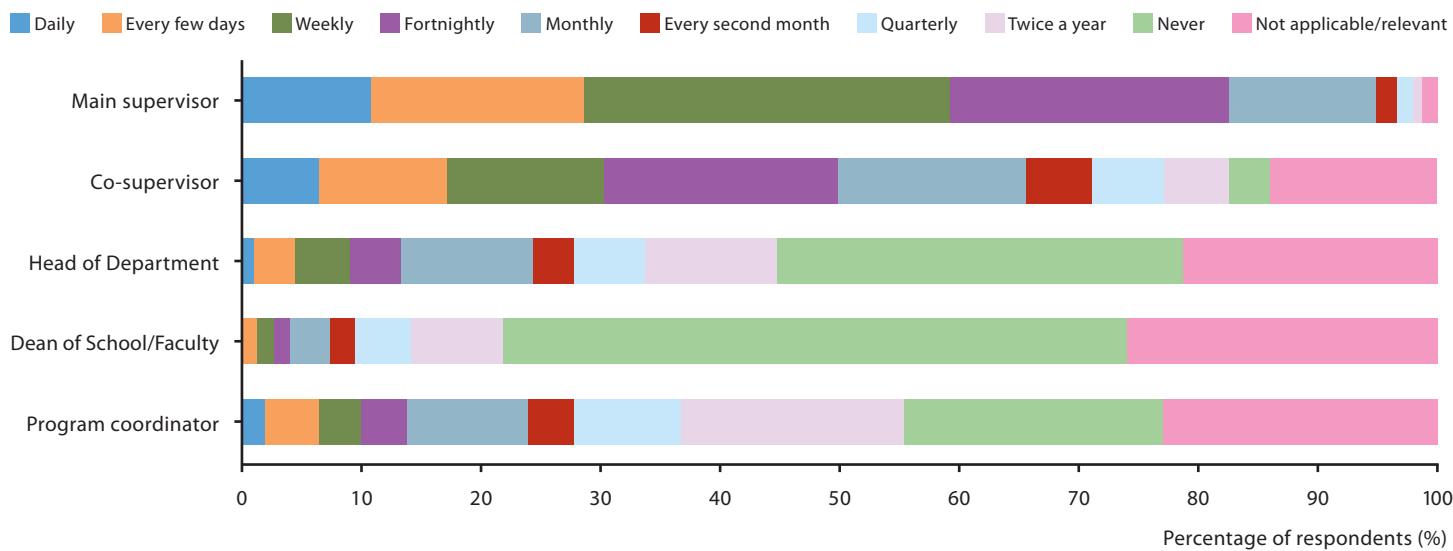
- Most welcoming/supportive of international PhD students: Australia (38.7%), US (29%)
- Most accessible visa system: Australia (25.8%), Canada (22.6%)
- Most supportive of international PhD student families: Australia (29%), Canada (25.8%)

2. SATISFACTION WITH SUPERVISION

The vast majority of HDR students in Australia reported positively upon their overall experience. In particular, the majority reported favourably about the friendly, interactive research environment and relationships with their supervisor.

Over 80% of participants reported meeting with their main supervisor at least once every fortnight and 60% reported daily or weekly meetings.

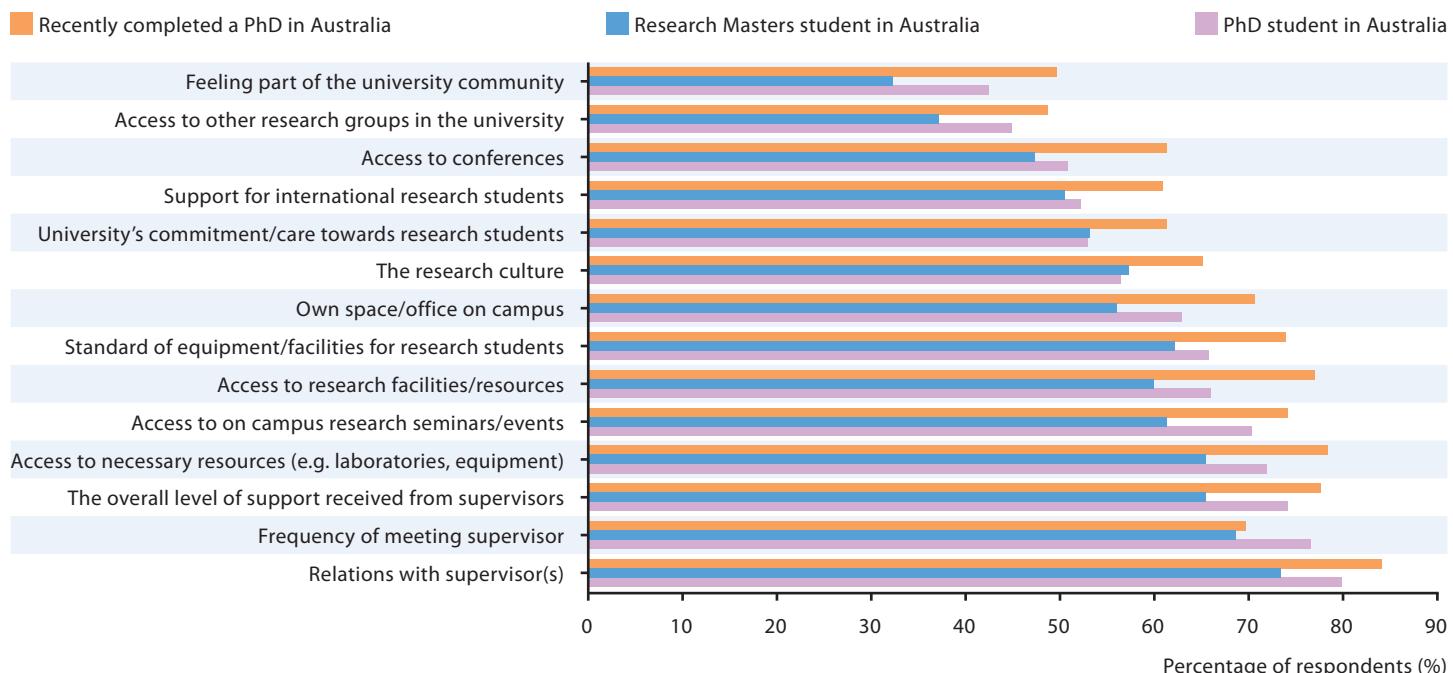
How frequently PhD students in Australia meet with key university/academic staff



Over three quarters of current PhD students reported very high levels of satisfaction with the frequency of their meetings with a supervisor.

85% of graduates were positive about the relationship they had developed with their supervisor while undertaking their research.

High levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the research experience



Satisfaction with aspects of the research experience at Go8 universities

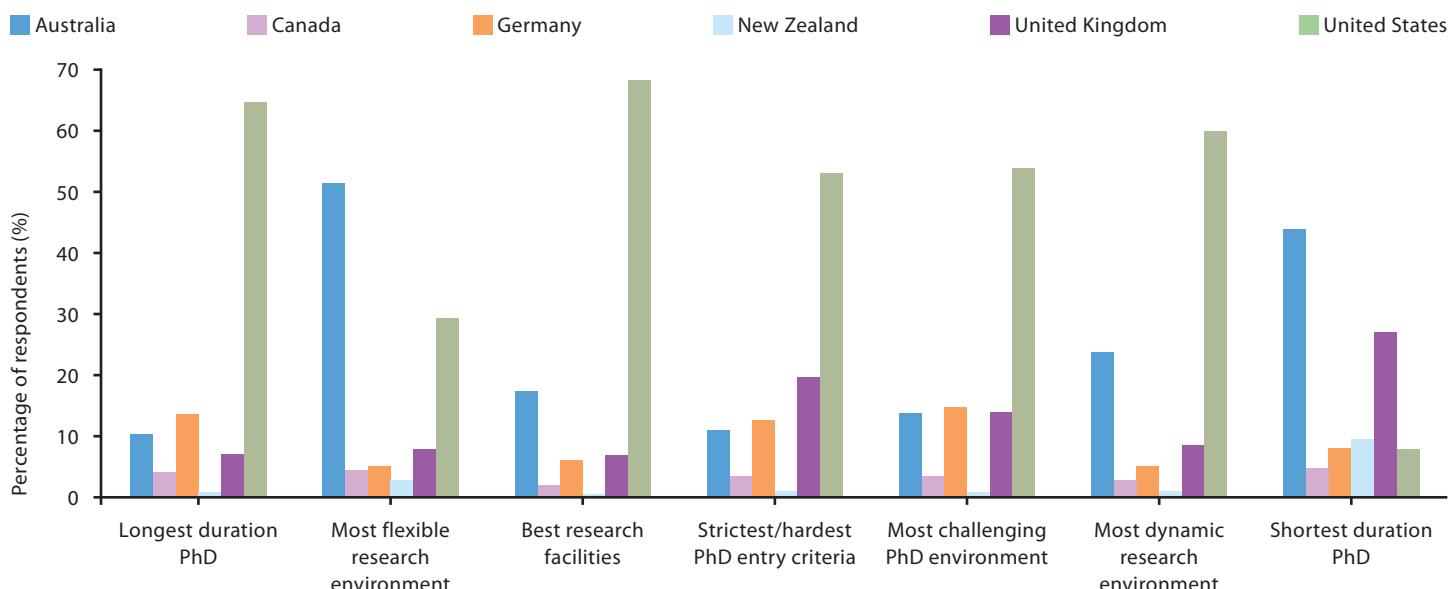
Variable	
Relations with the supervisor	80%
Frequency of meeting the supervisor	77%
The overall level of support received from the supervisor	74%
Access to the necessary resources	72%
Access to on campus research seminars and events	70%
Access to research facilities/resources	66%
The standard of facilities and equipment for research students	66%

3. SHORTER PhD AND FLEXIBLE RESEARCH CULTURE

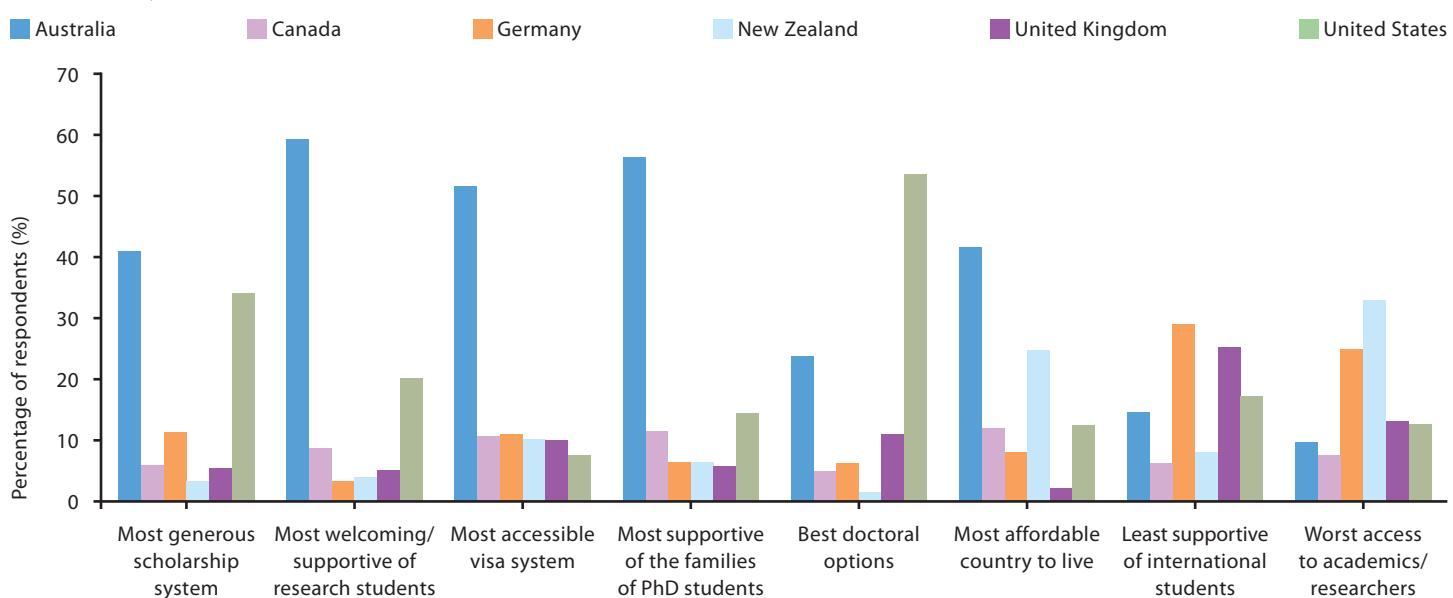
Compared to other destinations, other positive aspects of the Australian research experience were:

- the duration/speed of completion
- a less cumbersome research and reporting structure
- more flexible entry criteria
- a less prescriptive attitude towards the choice of topic

The country most associated with research profile drivers



The country most associated with research environment/access opportunities



Satisfaction levels by country

A pleasing result given the media coverage in Australia and India in 2009 was that over 80% of research students from India have a positive attitude towards their overall experience.

Further, none of the 22 Indian research students who participated in the qualitative discussions had experienced any form of racial discrimination or intolerance.

Levels of positive affirmation of Australia as a research destination

Vietnam	87.7%
Bangladesh	86.3%
Indonesia	85.8%
India	81.8%
Malaysia	72.8%
Iran	69.1%
Singapore	66.7%
China	61.5%

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirm that Australia is regarded as a progressive, dynamic and innovative country in which to study at the HDR level.

Many participants referred to the practical and applied approach to research and a flat hierarchy in which research students are treated as colleagues. The majority feel they are welcome members of a team as well as encouraged to engage, speak and interact with fellow researchers and supervisors.

Other positive elements of the research experience include the duration of an Australian PhD, a less cumbersome research and reporting structure, more flexible entry criteria and a less prescriptive attitude towards the choice of topic than observed elsewhere.

High levels of satisfaction with the level of access to supervisors was also a major theme throughout the findings of this survey.

As a destination Australia also continues to be associated with friendliness, multiculturalism, high quality universities and safety.